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Gender Differences in Reading Comprehension

This study, written by Dr Jennifer Herriman of the University of Göteborg, is a critical analysis of the vocabulary in the English reading comprehension tests in the Swedish University Entrance Examinations ("Högskoleprovet") from 1992 to 1996. It examines the vocabulary in the texts, questions and answer alternatives and compares the vocabulary in the questions where there are big differences in the success rates of male and female test participants.

The comparison reveals among many other things the fact that "female-friendly" vocabulary is chiefly concerned with the humanities, especially the personal sphere of the individual, feelings and relationships; while the "male-friendly" vocabulary has to do with the factual, impersonal sphere of public life, science, economics and politics.

This new survey of gender and language, which is entitled *Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension*, is published by Institutionen för Pedagogik, Avdelning för Språkpedagogik, at the University of Göteborg.

ÅKE PERSSON

Themes in Contemporary Irish Literature

The title of this essay is not totally unproblematic and poses questions which could be dwelt on. What, for example, does the description "contemporary" include? Can James Joyce be considered contemporary? He died in 1941, so he is of course not contemporary in the strict sense that he is still alive. Yet, his writing continues to influence not only Irish literature but literature world-wide. The same question could most certainly be posed in relation to William Butler Yeats, who died in 1939. In the extension, it could even be asked about Jonathan Swift, who died more than two hundred years ago but whose hard-hitting satires speak to readers and inspire writers of today.

The label "Irish" could also be lingered on. What is *Irish* literature? Is it literature written in the language of Irish (Gaelic)? Or does it refer to literature written *in Ireland*, in Gaelic as well as in English? If it refers to literature written *in Ireland*, are James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett Irish? As is known, they were all born in Ireland, but for various reasons they decided to continue their literary careers abroad, James Joyce in Switzerland and Italy, Shaw and Wilde in Britain, and Beckett in France. Today, we have similar problems with the acclaimed novelists William Trevor, born in Ireland, now living in southern England, and Iris Murdoch, just to take two examples. Trevor would probably still be thought of as Irish, whereas Murdoch, I suspect, would be considered British.

That the thorny problem of nationality is not merely an issue for academics who have nothing else to do than to quarrel about these matters was clearly shown in 1982, when *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* appeared.¹ One of the poets included here was Seamus Heaney, born on a farm in Northern Ireland – therefore geographically and legally speaking British – but since the early 1970s living in Dublin in the Republic. It did not take long for Heaney to respond to and express his annoyance with the inclusion of his work in this anthology. In a long poem entitled "An Open Letter," he emphatically distances himself from being thought of as "British," stating half-way through the poem:

My passport's green.
No glass of ours was ever raised
To toast *The Queen*.

You'll understand I draw the line
 At being robbed of what is mine,
 My *patria*, my deep design
 To be at home
 In my own place and dwell within
 Its proper name –
 Traumatic Ireland!...

And the poem ends:

But British, no, the name's not right.
 Yours truly, Seamus.²

Interestingly, when the Nobel Prize was announced in British papers in the autumn of 1995, British commentators sensibly referred to Heaney as Irish, and the poet's declaration is, no doubt, the principal reason for that.

However, it is not my intention in this essay to problematize the issues of "contemporary" and "Irish" too much, but for the reader they may remain points for further contemplation. Here, I will very loosely define "contemporary" as "the last thirty-forty years" and "Irish literature" as "literature in English written by writers born and mainly working on the island of Ireland." What I hope to do is to point to the most prominent themes which may be helpful to bear in mind when approaching that treasure which is Irish literature, and to give examples of how these themes are expressed by voices considered interesting and provocative. The focus will be on poetry, although the main points in the discussion are, it seems to me, also relevant to fiction and drama.

My previous comments on "nationality" bring me once more to Seamus Heaney. It is next to impossible nowadays to begin an essay or a lecture on Irish literature without referring to the 1995 Nobel Laureate, such are his popularity and appeal among critics and "ordinary readers" alike. Collections of his poetry were almost certain to top the bestseller lists, both in Ireland and Britain, even before the prize, and now he has become even more of a commercial as well as an academic industry.³ It is illuminating to examine briefly how the news that the Nobel Prize had been given to Heaney was received in Ireland. I think it was Dr. Johnson who once said that "the Irish are a fair-minded race for they never speak well of each other." If he had been in Dublin when the Prize was announced he would probably have felt lost, for the news was welcomed with almost universal praise of both the man and his work. In a country where the love of words is always expressed, not least in the many pubs, everybody suddenly became an expert at literary criticism, and commentators and critics competed for space in newspapers, talk shows and radio programmes. For Ireland, a country struggling to assert its cultural identity, mainly in relation to Britain, the many victories in the Eurovision Song Contest in recent years were occasions of enormous pride, as were the successes of the Irish football team, of the Olympic swimmer

Michelle Smith, of the rock groups U2 and The Cranberries, of the singers Van Morrison, Sinéad O'Connor and Enya, and of films such as *The Field*, *My Left Foot*, *The Crying Game*, *The Commitments* and *In the Name of the Father*. Yet, Heaney winning the Nobel Prize for Literature stirred emotions in ways that almost surprised the Irish themselves. This was so, because literature has a very special place in Irish life. It is of course somewhat of a cliché, but one cannot ignore the fact that literary competitions are organised in schools, in magazines, on TV and radio, stimulating and inspiring young and old to express themselves. Poetry readings are attended by crowds every week, literary festivals and summer schools are engaged in fruitful competition, and, interestingly, writers and other artists do not have to pay taxes on their creative work. It is tempting to ask: How can a country so dedicated to the written and spoken word *not* produce literary giants and prize winners like Shaw, Yeats, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Brendan Behan, short story writers like Frank O'Connor, Séan O'Faolain, and Mary Lavin, dramatists like Séan O'Casey and John Millington Synge, and more recently novelists and dramatists like Edna O'Brien, John McGahern, John Banville, Jennifer Johnston, Brian Friel, and the Booker Prize winner Roddy Doyle, again just to mention a few? In this context, then, it was felt that Heaney winning the Nobel Prize was the ultimate proof that Irish literature could claim to be the best in the world.

Be that as it may, Seamus Heaney's poetry was praised by the Swedish Academy and others for its "lyrical beauty" and when reading his poetry it is difficult not to agree with that assessment. His poems are carefully crafted, frequently quite brief, lending themselves to quiet meditation. Nevertheless, some critics have accused Heaney of a lack of commitment, especially political, and argue that his poetry in fact says very little and upsets very few. Much of his poetry, they hold, is beautiful but safe. Perhaps they are not totally wrong, and it is true that he writes in one of his poems "Whatever you say, say nothing,"⁴ which could be interpreted as demonstrating a lack of courage in times when leaders of moral stature and integrity are few and far between.

Heaney rose to fame with his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), in which his poetry deals with life on a farm in all its many aspects. At a time when Ireland began moving from a rural to an urban economy, and when one farm after another had to be closed down, it is not surprising that the slightly nostalgic tone and subject matter of Heaney's poetry appealed to a wide readership. It has close affinities to Romantic poetry, and Heaney's debt to Wordsworth is both acknowledged and well documented. Add to that the heavy media interest in everything Northern Irish, due to the violence which started in 1969, and Heaney's popularity is at least partially explained. According to some critics, anyway. Whether this claim is valid or not, it is difficult not to be moved by much of Heaney's early poetry, where he struggles to find a voice and to free himself from the pressure of remaining

on the family farm. It haunts him and it fascinates him, he both belongs there and feels alienated from it. More recently, as the Irish critic Terence Brown puts it, Heaney has moved on "to make his work attentive to the urgencies and pains of Eastern European experience and writing."⁴ But his early poem "Follower" is a moving account of his attempts to come to terms with the influence of his father. The grown-up man expresses his admiration for the old man, and although he has chosen a different path, he realises that he cannot completely free himself of his father and his past. It ends:

I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away.⁵

By far the most important theme of Irish literature is its fascination, or indeed obsession, with history. A series of invasions later continued with that of Cromwell and his massacres in the seventeenth century, and, as is known, Ireland did not gain her independence until 1922, when the island was divided into two: 26 counties in the Republic, and six under the jurisdiction of Britain, something which is the basis for what we have read and unfortunately continue to read in the papers. It is impossible to try to understand Irish literature without at least some awareness of Ireland's violent history. Indeed, the famous Easter Rising in 1916, which was crushed but which was crucial in the fight for independence, was very much a writers' rebellion. Several poets were leading figures on this occasion, illustrating the close relationship between word and action in Ireland. The Rising was unsuccessful and the leaders were executed.

Recently, the violence has been highlighted by the conflict which has gone on for almost three decades. Many writers have explored and examined the many traumas and sufferings involved and tried to come to terms with often painful realities on the individual and collective levels. Here, I would like to draw the reader's attention to Brendan Kennelly, a contemporary of Heaney's and actually considered more promising of the two in the 1960s, and now one of the most popular poets in Ireland. In 1983, Kennelly published a long sequence of poems entitled *Cromwell* – the poet himself refers to it as an epic poem – in which he attempts to understand the relationship between Ireland and Britain which, he writes, "has produced a singularly tragic mess."⁶ Perhaps surprisingly, however, in his attempts to understand the different mentalities involved in this "mess," he does not accuse Cromwell, who instead of remaining the super-demon into which the Irish have made him over the centuries, becomes a human being with genuine

doubts, fears, longings, dreams and hopes. Therefore, in order to subvert deep-rooted prejudice and move forward, Kennelly's aim is to explode the myth of Cromwell which has been so damaging to the Irish psyche. That it is an uphill struggle was proved to Kennelly after he had appeared on TV discussing the sequence and explaining why he wrote it. He was out walking in the streets of Dublin when a man saw him, came up to him and said: "It's you, you bastard who writes good things about Cromwell." And promptly hit Kennelly in the face, almost knocking him out. Nevertheless, in a sequence of this kind, violence is unavoidable in order to express the urgency and intensity of the underlying attitudes and conflicts, a situation the scope of which it is difficult for outsiders fully to comprehend. In "Rebecca Hill," for instance, we read about the gruesome act of "half-hanging":

Rebecca Hill was fifteen years
Half-hanged then taken down
As comely a girl as ever walked
Through Kildare Town

Taken half-hanged from an oak-tree
She seemed to recover her wits
The rebels saw her flutter alive
Then buried her quick...⁷

However, Kennelly takes care not to blame any one party for the atrocities. Instead, he emphatically proposes that Catholics and Protestants are equally prone to commit tit-for-tat violent acts in pursuit of the "right" cause, as in the humorous, Monty Python-like poem "Gusto":

The Catholic bombed the Protestant's home
The Protestant bombed the Catholic's home
The Protestant castrated the Catholic
The Catholic castrated the Protestant
The Protestant set fire to the Catholic Recreation Centre
The Catholic set fire to the Protestant Recreation Centre
The Catholic cut the tail of the Protestant dog
The Protestant cut the tail of the Catholic dog
The Protestant hanged the Catholic
The Catholic hanged the Protestant
As they dangled like dolls from the freshly-painted
Protestant and Catholic gibbets
They held hands in mid-air and sang
With spiritual gusto, "Onward, Christian Soldiers!"⁸

This automatically brings us to the so-called Troubles in the North, which broke out in 1969: Terrorism, if you are a politician or a member of the police force, freedom fighting, if you are a hardcore Irish Republican, defence, if you are a Loyalist/Unionist. Thousands of people, both Catholics and Prot-

estants, have been killed, many of them just for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Innocent people have been killed and maimed, people just wanting to lead ordinary lives with their ordinary families in what could be ordinary cities. Patrick Galvin's hard-hitting and uncompromising poem "Letter to a British Soldier on Irish Soil" forcefully articulates a position which does not seem too interested in peaceful solutions, advising:

Go home, Soldier.
Your presence here
Destroys the air
Your smile disfigures us.
Go home, Soldier
Before we send you home
Dead.⁹

James Simmons's poem "Claudy," on the other hand, arguably deals with the result and consequences of the position outlined above. Simmons, a poet from the North, has lived the reality up there, in Belfast and elsewhere, and in the poem, which is breathless in its stark simplicity and passionate candour, he depicts a terrorist attack on a perfectly ordinary morning, when people are going about their everyday business. Yet, in a few minutes, their lives will be shattered and forever changed:

An explosion too loud for your eardrums to bear,
and young children squealing like pigs in the square,
and all faces chalk-white and streaked with bright red,
and the glass and the dust and the terrible dead.

And Christ, little Katherine Aiken is dead,
and Mrs McLaughlin is pierced through the head.
Meanwhile to Dungiven the killers have gone,
and they're finding it hard to get through on the phone.¹⁰

It is somewhat of a problem to attempt to separate themes since they are so closely interlinked. Before, during and subsequent to the Independence, religion played a crucial role in defining the Irish, politically and culturally. The ties with the Pope in Rome have always been extremely strong, and the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church is even written into the Irish Constitution. It is not a fruitful enterprise to engage in value judgements, but it would be fair to argue that the Catholic Church has had a privileged position in Ireland when it comes to control of and power over people's lives, thoughts and actions. It is a fact that the Church has controlled much of the education and it is a fact that it has been influential in shaping policies related to health, sex and marriage, for example, on abortion, contraceptives and divorce. It may seem inevitable that many individuals and groups have found and still find this rigid power structure as being in conflict with their

own wishes. Irish literature is full of this kind of frustration, caused by intense clashes between individual needs and a system imposing itself on those needs. Particularly vulnerable, perhaps, in this system are women, and Austin Clarke, who died in 1974, describes one of these many heartbreaking conflicts of the recent past in a poem entitled "The Redemptorist." In the confession box, a woman seeks marital advice from her priest, who, against her doctor's firm advice, orders the woman to become pregnant again, a seventh time, even if this will kill her. Afraid, she obeys, and the poem concludes:

Her tiredness obeyed
That Saturday night:
Her husband's weight
Digging her grave. So, in nine months, she
Sank in great agony on a Monday.
Her children wept in the orphanage,
Huddled together in the annexe,
While, proud of the Black Cross on his badge,
The Liguorian, at Adam and Eve's,
Ascended the pulpit, sulphuring his sleeves
And setting fire to the holy text.¹¹

The Catholic Church is undoubtedly still highly influential in many ways. For example, in 1986, Ireland voted no to divorce by a wide margin. One could have different views on divorce, but it is generally accepted that the no victory was due to the priests who more or less ordered, from the pulpits, their congregations to vote no. After that, the vastly popular poet Paul Durcan gave vent to his anger and frustration, shared by many, in a poem called "The Divorce Referendum, Ireland, 1986," where he strongly protests:

I have come into this temple today to pray
And be healed by, and joined with, the Spirit of Life;
Not to be invaded by ideology.
I say unto you, preacher, and orators of the Hierarchy,
Do not bring ideology into my house of prayer...¹²

As late as in November 1995, the Irish voted yes to a change of the divorce laws by a margin of 0,7%.

The reader may be justified in thinking that a fairly bleak picture of Ireland through its literature has been painted. But there are changes taking place in contemporary Ireland, both on the political and cultural levels. People are at least beginning to consider listening to each other, despite many recent serious setbacks. Minority groups are beginning to make their voices heard in ways that were not possible earlier, and the Church is being closely examined as it has never been before, by ordinary people, by the media and by writers, like Brendan Kennelly and Paul Durcan.

However, perhaps the most significant change is that women are taking charge of their own lives. This also means that they are making themselves the subjects of literature rather than its objects, or, in the poet Eavan Boland's words, "[women] have acquired voices. They have turned from poems into poets."¹³ There has been an explosion of women's writing in the last decade or so, and it is not an exaggeration to say that Irish literature has been given totally new dimensions through the perspectives of women writers. Much of what they explore was previously considered either taboo, because too sexual, or not fit for "high" literature, because too mundane. Gradually, the everyday life, problems and concerns of women have become legitimate topics to write about. Their poetry frequently depicts as bleak and harsh realities as earlier, more traditional (male) poetry, but in a more intimate way and obviously from a totally different angle, destabilising a previously fixed male world and male outlook on life. Serious and complex issues are often coupled with a subversive kind of humour and irony, where the rigidity of male codes is severely undermined. Paula Meehan, Eavan Boland, Rita Ann Higgins and Julie O'Callaghan are just four significant names among many.

The experience dealt with in Paula Meehan's moving poem "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" would previously have been swept under the carpet. Becoming a symbol of a culture which has been eager to hide great personal suffering and which has for long forced people to carry their own heavy burdens, Virgin Mary laments the present state of affairs, including her own silence:

On a night like this I remember the child
 who came with fifteen summers to her name,
 and she lay down at my feet
 without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
 and she pushed her secret out into the night,
 far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
 bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,
 and though she cried out to me in extremis
 I did not move,
 I didn't lift a finger to help her,
 I didn't intercede with heaven,
 nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear...¹⁴

These, then, are some of the most prominent themes in Irish literature of today, as I perceive it. Needless to say, there are others, for instance, humour, which has had and still has a highly important role to play in the questioning of social boundaries. Related to humour is the famous Irish wit, which, although it can as often be heard in a pub atmosphere as in literature, is a true hallmark of Irish literature.

Yet another important feature is the move from a rural environment to

an urban, which becomes closely interlinked with the examination of old values and old power structures. There is a new group of mainly younger Irish writers, poets, novelists and dramatists who try to liberate themselves from old burdens, the old concerns with land and history, and who try to explore new identities in the city. Not surprisingly, a new language is being born, new idioms are sought, as can be seen in, for example, Roddy Doyle's and Dermot Bolger's novels, which move between fragmentation and a sense of belonging, between a hilarious sense of humour and total despair.

The Irish dramatist Séan O'Casey once said that "Ireland is one of the oldest countries in Europe but still only in its teens,"¹⁵ struggling to grow up, struggling to find its identity in a rapidly changing world. Like all kinds of growing, it involves pain, it involves laughter, it involves redefinitions. As mentioned earlier, Heaney's poem "Follower" looks backwards, a young Heaney trying on many levels to come to terms with his father and his past. It is fitting, therefore, to let a three-year-old daughter end this brief exploration, symbolising a shift from looking backwards to looking forwards, in an attempt at seeing the world from a fresh perspective, redefining it by questioning it. In Brendan Kennelly's enormously popular poem "Poem from a Three Year Old," the young girl bombards the adult listener/reader with apparently childish but huge questions about, for example, life and death, what matters in life, what it means to grow old. In this act, the child challenges the priorities given to seemingly meaningless work over play and the nurturing of the imagination, and thereby affronts the reader's own fixed, preconceived values and priorities:

...I want to play
 the floor you come and sweep
 with the huge broom.

The dirt you sweep, what happens that,
 what happens all the dirt you sweep
 from flowers and people, what
 happens all the dirt? Is all the
 dirt what's left of flowers and
 people, all the dirt there in a
 heap under the huge broom that
 sweeps everything away?

Why you work so hard, why brush
 and sweep to make a heap of dirt?...¹⁶

Notes

¹Edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).

²First published in a Field Day pamphlet (Field Day: Field Day Theatre Company, 1983). Quotation is taken from the U.S. edition entitled *Ireland's Field Day*

(Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 23-29.

³In *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 57.

⁴Terence Brown. "The New Nobel Laureate." *The European English Messenger*, 4.2 (Autumn 1995), p. 11.

⁵*Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 24-25.

⁶"Note." *Cromwell* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1987), p. [6].

⁷*Cromwell*, p. 60.

⁸*Cromwell*, p. 128.

⁹First collected in *Between Innocence and Peace: Favourite Poems of Ireland*, chosen by Brendan Kennelly (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1993), pp. 203-205.

¹⁰*Poems 1956-1986* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1986), pp. 125-26.

¹¹*The Collected Poems of Austin Clarke* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974), pp. 379-80. "Adam and Eve's" in the poem refers to a church in Dublin.

¹²*The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, edited by Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 283-84.

¹³*A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989). Quotation is taken from the anthology *Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present*, edited by Katie Donovan, A. N. Jeffares and Brendan Kennelly (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p. 242.

¹⁴*The Man Who Was Marked by Winter* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 1991), pp. 40-42.

¹⁵Quoted in *Ireland Past and Present*, edited by Brendan Kennelly (London: Multimedia Publications, 1985; Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), p. 172.

¹⁶*A Time for Voices: Selected Poems 1960-1990* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990), pp. 40-41.

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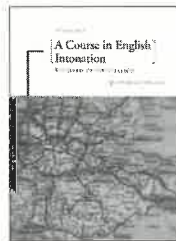
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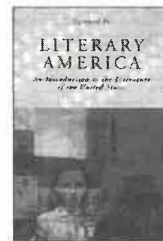
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The Best British Poet of 1997

The Liverpool-born poet, Jamie McKendrick, has been awarded The Forward Prize – the most prestigious poetry prize in Britain – as the best British Poet of 1997. The award is for his latest collection of poems, *The Marble Fly*, which has previously also been the poetry choice of the Poetry Book Society of Great Britain. Jamie McKendrick has recently been visiting Sweden for the first time and has given public readings of his poetry in Malmö, Helsingborg and Göteborg. During the autumn, he has also been writer-in-residence at the Department of English, University of Göteborg.

The title poem of *The Marble Fly* refers to a fly carved on a Pompeian wall-relief – an image of the momentary made permanent, of movement and stasis. These are also themes that recur in the poet's two earlier collections: *The Strococo Room* (1991) and *The Kiosk on the Brink* (1993). All three collections are published by Oxford University Press.

Taken Awares

I fall into every trap
they set for me –
mantrap, mousetrap, birdlime.

Every time
I take the bait –
the worm, the cheese, whatever.

I pluck the wire
that shifts the lever
that springs the teeth.

Then, in the calm before death,
I flatter myself
I'd seen it all a mile off.

I even manage a small laugh.

(From *The Marble Fly*)